



UPDATE

Virginia Keeps America Moving

Winter 2002

511 Travel Phone Service Coming to the I-81 Corridor



In mid-February, drivers traveling along the I-81 corridor in Virginia will have a new means of accessing a host of travel information. By using wireless phones during travel, or home phones prior to departure, travelers can dial the number "5-1-1" and obtain real-time information on traffic conditions,

traffic incidents and delays, weather conditions, road construction, a variety of services, lodging and restaurants. The voice-activated system prompts the caller through a menu of options, directing them to the appropriate area and providing the requested information.

In July 2000, the Federal Communications Commission officially assigned 511 as the single nationwide number for travel information, in the same way callers dial 411 for directory assistance and 911 for emergency services. This marks the first time one number has been available for people to access travel information - whether they're touring the area or commuting to their homes. In Virginia, the 511 travel information line is provided by the Virginia Department of Transportation, in conjunction with the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, Virginia State Police and Shentel Communications.

Virginia is one of seven pilot states in the nation to launch the 511 travel phone service. In December 2001, 511 debuted in Utah to assist visitors during the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. Depending on the caller's wireless service, a carrier charge may be incurred. In most cases, however, the call will be free.

New Choices at Christiansburg Exit 118

A new interchange means new choices for motorists exiting Interstate 81 at Christiansburg. When entering Exit 118 at Christiansburg from either the northbound or southbound side, travelers will find themselves on a collector distributor (CD) road. The CD road acts as a funnel, taking traffic exiting mainline I-81 and placing it on a parallel road to the interstate. Once on the CD road, drivers will need to select either exit A, B or C. Exit A leads to eastbound Route 460 Bypass/Falling Branch Road, Exit B places traffic on westbound Route 460 Bypass and is the correct exit for traveling to Virginia Tech and Blacksburg. Exit C leads to downtown Christiansburg.

Heavily attended special and sporting events, particularly at Virginia Tech, lead to large traffic volumes at Exit 118. The CD road provides greater traffic capacity for exiting traffic from I-81 at this area. This new traffic pattern needs everyone's attention.

News Briefs

I-81 Program Changes Possible

Due to revenue shortfalls necessitating reductions to the State budget and VDOT's current financial situation, the department is revising its transportation program that could affect planned projects for I-81. The information in this newsletter is subject to change. If changes do occur in the program, they will be posted on the VDOT web site, www.virginiaDOT.org

Private Group Proposes to Widen I-81

A public-private proposal was submitted to VDOT in January by Star Solutions to widen I-81 to eight lanes within 15 years. Under the proposal, trucks would pay a toll to use I-81 and would get four lanes reserved for their use only. At press time, VDOT officials had not reviewed the proposal. Under the Public-Private Partnership Act, VDOT must advertise for other companies to submit a conceptual proposal. Potential competitors will have a 45-day window to submit their proposals. After a thorough review of this proposal and potential others that may be submitted, a recommendation will go to the Commonwealth Transportation Board who may approve advancing the selected proposal to a second-phase review. Depending on the outcome of the review, the Commissioner of Transportation can enter into negotiations with a private firm. This entire process could take up to more than a year.

New Web Site Launched

You can access the latest information about I-81 on VDOT's new, improved web site, www.VirginiaDOT.org. When you get to the web site, just click on the "Projects" tab, then on "I-81" under the Most Requested in the left column. Launched in October, the web site is designed to be a one-stop clearinghouse for all VDOT information with links to travel and transportation information on many other sites.

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BRISTOL DISTRICT

Washington County

Construction Projects

Construction is under way to widen Interstate 81 in Bristol from just south of Exit 3 to just north of Exit 7, along with modifications to the Exit 5 interchange with Route 11 (Lee Highway). Eight bridges are being reconstructed on the project. Jones Brothers Inc. of Mount Juliet, Tenn., is the contractor. The estimated cost of the project, including design, right of way and construction is about \$53 million. The estimated completion date is summer 2002.

Design Projects

VDOT is designing the reconstruction of two of Abingdon's busiest interchanges, exits 14 and 17. Public hearings for exits 14 and 17 are slated for 2002, with construction dates governed by the availability of funds.

Wythe County

I-77/I-81 Location Study

A comprehensive location study is currently under way to develop alternatives to alleviate congestion on the 11-mile overlap of Interstates 77 and 81 in Wythe County. The in-depth review includes environmental evaluations, economic and right of way considerations, terrain, geology, constructability, impact of traffic during construction, safety and how the proposed locations would serve the nation's interstate network. At a citizen information meeting last fall, attendees had an opportunity to review several possible alternatives including the "no build" option. Feedback from participants at the information meeting, along with input from a citizens advisory group and community leaders will be used to help refine the alternatives, which will be shared with the public during a second citizen information meeting to be held in late summer 2002, with the location public hearing slated for fall 2003. Public involvement is an important element in the location study process. Citizens are encouraged to obtain information about the study and share their ideas with the study team via the interactive Web site, www.interchange77-81.com, or by contacting the toll-free line at 1-866-547-7481 or 1-800-307-4630 for the hearing impaired. Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern, Inc., Roanoke is the consultant engineering firm performing the study. Virginia Tech is providing assistance with the traffic analysis, economic development analysis as well as coordinating a citizen advisory group and other outreach opportunities.

SALEM DISTRICT

Botetourt County

Median guardrail: VDOT has already upgraded guardrail in many locations with a version that is more crash resistant for today's vehicles. VDOT has looked at I-81's median to see which locations might benefit from some type of barrier to help lessen the impact of crossover crashes. Botetourt County was determined to be a priority location for double-sided guardrail in the median. Specifically, VDOT will install 52,000 feet of double-sided guardrail at 20 locations in Botetourt County beginning in spring 2002. By studying accident data, engineers have found that more accidents occur where the median is narrow. However, adding a barrier in the median of I-81 is complicated because the highway runs through hilly terrain. There are many places where the northbound lanes are higher than the southbound lanes, and vice versa. That makes construction in the median difficult and will require improving some existing shoulders in the median.

Design Projects

A 16-mile section of I-81 currently under design begins just south of Wildwood Road in Roanoke County and extends to two miles north of Exit 150 in Botetourt County. The section is divided into six segments, one of which is in Botetourt County. Consultant firms have been hired to draw plans for each segment. Ground and aerial survey work has been completed, and design is currently under way. New interchange designs also will be included in these plans. The Botetourt County segment is:

◆ Mile markers 147 to 152 including Exit 150 (Route 220). The consultant firm of Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern of Roanoke began design work in April 2000. Traffic analysis, including I-73 traffic, was completed in October 2001. A citizen information meeting to present a suggested design is tentatively scheduled for later this year.

Acceleration/deceleration lanes:

Engineers are looking at interchanges to identify places where lanes can be lengthened for safer merging movements. Some problem areas were identified in the I-81 widening studies. In Botetourt County, Exit 162 near Buchanan has been identified as a location to improve. A wider bridge and lanes for this exit are currently being designed, and construction should begin in early 2003.

Montgomery County

Rock fence: VDOT is installing a fence to catch rocks that break loose on a mountainous section of I-81 between Christiansburg and Ironto. The fence, expected to be completed in spring 2002, will keep rocks from rolling into the roadway.

Construction Projects

Construction on the new Route 460 interchange with I-81 began in spring 1998 near mile marker 118. I-81 has been widened, collector-distributor roads have been constructed parallel to the interstate, and a new interchange has been built. This project includes construction of 10 new bridges and replacement of two existing bridges. The collector-distributor lanes have been completed, and Exit 118B opened in August 2001 allowing motorists to access the Route 460 Bypass toward Blacksburg without having to pass through the busy Route 11/460 area. Estimated completion is spring 2002.

Work to extend the acceleration and deceleration lanes at exits 114 and 109 was recently completed. These exits connect with Route 8 at Christiansburg and Route 177 in Radford, respectively.

Pulaski County

Median guardrail: Pulaski County was determined to be a priority location for double-sided guardrail in the median. Specifically, VDOT will install 48,000 feet at 13 locations in Pulaski County. Installation is expected to begin in spring 2002.

Roanoke County

Acceleration/deceleration lanes:

Engineers are looking at interchanges to identify places where lanes can be lengthened for safer merging movements. Some problem areas were identified in the I-81 widening studies.

◆ Drivers traveling from I-581 to I-81 previously encountered a short merging distance. The acceleration lanes leading from northbound I-581 to I-81 at Exit 143 have been extended.

◆ Various acceleration and deceleration lanes will be extended at exits 140, 141 and 146 in Roanoke County in 2002. These interchanges connect with Routes 311, 419 and 115, respectively.

High tech communications: A network of message signs and highway advisory

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radio will be built in the Roanoke and New River valleys. These message signs will provide real-time information to drivers about conditions on I-81, so they can adjust their travel if they wish. Expect to see signs on I-81 and at junctions at I-581, Route 460 and Route 8 in the New River Valley, and Plantation Road and Electric Road in the Roanoke area, among others. Work will begin sometime in spring 2002 and is expected to be completed in mid-2003.

Design Projects

A 16-mile section of I-81 currently under design begins just south of Wildwood Road in Roanoke County and extends to two miles north of Exit 150 in Botetourt County. The section is divided into six segments, five of them are in Roanoke County, and consultant firms have been hired to draw plans for each segment. Ground and aerial survey work has been completed, and design is currently under way. New interchange designs also will be included in these plans. The Roanoke County segments are:

- ◆ Mile markers 135 to 138 including Exit 137 (Route 112 Wildwood Road). The consultant firm of Site-Blauvelt Engineers of Richmond began design work in June 2000. The traffic analysis, including Interstate 73 traffic was completed in September 2001. A citizen information meeting to present a suggested design is tentatively planned for later this year.
- ◆ Mile markers 138 to 140 including Exit 140 (Route 311 Thompson Memorial Drive). The consultant firm of Gannett Fleming of Newport News began design work in June 2000. The traffic analysis, including I-73 traffic was completed in October 2001. A citizen information meeting to present a suggested design is tentatively scheduled for later this year.
- ◆ Mile markers 140 to 143 including Exit 141 (Route 419 Electric Road). The consultant firm of David Volkert & Associates of Alexandria began design work in May 2000. The traffic analysis, including I-73 traffic was completed in October 2001. A citizen information meeting to present a suggested design is tentatively scheduled for later this year.
- ◆ Mile markers 143 to 144 including Exit 143 (Interstate 581). The consultant firm of URS Corp. of Richmond began design work in May 2000. Traffic analysis, including I-73 traffic, was completed in October 2001. A citizen information meeting to present a suggested design is tentatively scheduled for later this year.

◆ Mile markers 144 to 147 including Exit 146 (Route 115 Plantation Road). The consultant firm of Gannett Fleming of Newport News design work began in June 2000. Traffic analysis, including I-73 traffic, was completed in October 2001. A citizen information meeting to present a suggested design is tentatively scheduled for later this year.

Public hearings on all design will be held later in project development.

STAUNTON DISTRICT

District Wide

◆ Implement intelligent transportation systems such as variable message boards, pavement weather sensors, permanent overhead message boards, radios. Total project cost is estimated to be \$1,550,000.

Frederick County

Safety Projects:

- ◆ Widen bridge on Route 669 over Interstate 81 at Whitehall. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2002. Total project cost is estimated to be \$7,283,700.
- ◆ Widen northbound and southbound bridges over Abram's Creek and extend acceleration and deceleration lanes. Construction advertisement projected for mid 2004. Total project cost is estimated to be \$8,400,000.

Design Projects

Design work has begun for widening eight miles of I-81 in Frederick County and Winchester. A timetable for construction has not been established and public meetings will be scheduled later in the project. The widening will take place from mile marker 312 to mile marker 320 and will be divided into three separate projects. The consulting firms of Wiley & Wilson and Burgess-Niple, both of Richmond, have been selected to design two of the projects. VDOT will design the third section.

Rockingham County

Safety Projects:

- ◆ Extend pedestrian box culvert under I-81 at James Madison University. Construction advertisement projected for early 2003. Total project cost is estimated to be \$265,000.
- ◆ Widen and rehabilitate bridges over C&W Railroad and Blacks Run. Construction advertisement projected for

spring 2004. Total project cost is estimated to be \$5,855,000.

◆ Replace bridge over Country Club Road and C&W Railroad. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2005. Total project cost is estimated to be \$5,340,000.

◆ Replace and widen bridge to four lanes on Stone Spring Road over I-81. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2004. Total project cost is estimated to be \$2,106,000.

Design Projects

Preliminary design work has been approved in the Transportation Development Plan for widening 12.4 miles of I-81 through Rockingham County and the city of Harrisonburg. A timetable for construction has not been established. The widening will take place from mile marker 240 to mile marker 253 and will be divided into three separate projects. The consulting firms of RK&K and Site-Blauvelt, both of Richmond, have been selected to design two of the projects. VDOT will design the third section.

Rockbridge County

Safety Projects:

- ◆ Widen and rehabilitate northbound and southbound bridges over Route 11 at Timber Ridge. Allocation for FY 2000-01 is \$3.7 million. Project could be advertised for bids late in 2002. Total project cost is estimated to be \$8,212,000.
- ◆ Widen northbound and southbound bridges at Route 716 and Mill Creek. Project could be advertised for bids late in 2002. Total project cost is estimated to be \$6,703,000.
- ◆ Replace bridge at Route 712 over I-81. Construction advertisement projected for late 2003. Total project cost is estimated to be \$1,928,000.

Design Projects

Preliminary design work has begun on three projects to widen Interstate 81 in Rockbridge County, covering 11.1 miles from mile marker 190 to mile marker 202. Construction on the southbound side is scheduled to begin in 2003. Construction on the northbound side is scheduled to start in 2005. Design also is underway for widening four bridges, the Buffalo Creek Bridges at mile marker 184 and the Maury River Bridges at mile marker 190. Included in the Buffalo Creek project is a truck-climbing lane leaving the bridge on the northbound side. Construction on the truck climbing lane and the two bridges is scheduled for spring 2002.

Public Participation – What You Can Expect

The Virginia Department of Transportation holds two types of meetings to obtain public input on major projects such as the expansion of Interstate 81: citizen information meetings and public hearings.

Citizen Information Meetings

Citizen information meetings are sometimes referred to as public information meetings or public participation meetings. The purpose of an information or participation meeting is to get the public's opinion on plans under development.

Citizen information meetings are generally held in the early stages of projects that are deemed complex or that could create major change in a community. During these meetings, VDOT displays proposed plans, engineering concepts or partially completed plans. These meetings occur well before VDOT has determined specific right of way and environmental impacts.

Two citizen information meetings are tentatively planned for 2002 in the Staunton District for I-81 projects. One meeting will be held on the three projects in Harrisonburg that comprise 12.4 miles of improvements planned on I-81. A second meeting will be held in Winchester on the three projects involving eight miles of proposed improvements to I-81. When exact dates are determined, they will be posted in local newspapers and on the VDOT Web site.

Public Hearings

The second type of meeting, the public hearing, is very different from a citizen information meeting. Public hearings occur when at least 40 percent of the plans are complete and if there is community interest in holding the hearing. They can deal with the location of a project, the design of a project or both location and design. At a hearing on a project location, specific environmental, historical and right of way effects are reviewed. A hearing on the design phase of a project involves detailed features of the entire road improvement, such as side-walks, utility location, box culverts, curbs and gutters.

The forum for the vast majority of VDOT public hearings is identical to that of citizen information meetings. Generally the meetings are informal, allowing citizens to meet one-on-one with VDOT staff and consultants. Questions will be answered in detail. Ideas, comments and proposed changes can be provided to the road designers, allowing them to incorporate these suggestions in the plans as much as possible. The opportunity for written comments is provided and often a court reporter is present to take oral comments in a private setting. Citizens are asked to send written comments within 10 days of the hearing date.

A formal transcript of the meeting is prepared following the 10-day comment period. The transcript and project package is given to the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB), which is responsible for accepting the plans as presented at the public hearing, accepting the plans with changes or rejecting the plans. Once the CTB votes on the design plans, the project can advance to the right of way stage and then onto construction, if funding is available.

Meeting Announcements

Citizen information meetings and public hearings are advertised in local newspapers at least 30 days in advance and again two weeks prior. They are also listed on VDOT's Web site at VirginiaDOT.org. Simply go to the "Projects" tab and scroll down to the "Community Involvement" link.

**This newsletter is on the VDOT website.
You can access it at VirginiaDOT.org
The web site has the most current
information on I-81.**



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